

# “Common Risks to the Winged Housegoat!”

Or

## The A-B-Cs of Non-Food Items That Birds Love to Eat

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For the Birds

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It's hard to say when the notion that parrots could eat and chew whatever they wanted took hold. Yes, they have an innate need to chew. This certainly arises from the need to keep their muscles and beak strong and in good repair. But when did it become normal for them to chew and eat plastics, finished wood, decorative items or bedspreads? What about vinyl flooring, automobile interiors or shake roofs? Parrots differ enormously by species when it comes to specific behaviors. But several species stand apart in their drive to chew, destroy and often consume their non-food items. Couple this with their manipulative skills and indulgent owners and we suddenly have a new syndrome!

### A

**Appetite.** When it comes to the innate nutritional needs of the many species kept as companion parrots, we have only a basic idea of their physiologic needs. Sure, we can meet their caloric needs and provide most essential nutrients. But what about the notion that many species may have evolved specialized behavioral and nutritional adaptations to their native environment? For example, the palm cockatoo and the hyacinth macaw exploit native nuts that furnished the caloric density for their unique body size and energy needs. Perhaps these same innate needs and biologic drives influence appetites and behaviors in our pets.

### B

**Baby toys.** Perhaps it is their intelligence or their willingness to bond with us so intensely or their ability to talk that blinds many of us to the fact that these great creatures are birds-not babies. Just as we shower our children and our friends' children with toys that delight and stimulate, we provide our companion birds with colorful fun baby toys. But differences between the chewing abilities of kids and birds make toy selection very important. Soft plastic and vinyl toys can be quickly destroyed and eaten by parrots. Cute? Yes! But these toys can end up in a bird's stomach and either release noxious chemicals as they degrade, or resist degradation for long periods of time and act as irritants or obstructive foreign bodies. Parrot owners are often surprised that their bird actually ingested a portion of the item it destroyed. A careful exam of a bird's dropping will often yield evidence of recent nonfood ingestion.

### C

**Crop Distention.** The crop of the parrot is the temporary food storage organ. While our stomach can expand to both hold and digest food, the crop of the bird will fill with food items and empty gradually as the stomach processes food. Baby parrots have large obvious crops. Most mature birds have crops that seem to be invisible, rarely full and usually covered with feathers. Whereas a crop that is slow to empty in a baby bird can indicate illness, a visible, slow emptying crop in a mature bird can be a sign of problems. Anything slowing the emptying of the stomach can slow the emptying of the crop. It is all too common for companion birds to accumulate nonfood items in their stomachs that will cause distention of the crop. The outlet from the stomach of the bird is very tiny. Nonfood items can accumulate and significantly interfere with normal digestion.

### D

**Dirt.** Certainly in my book, dirt is considered a nonfood item. Where as it may be normal in the wild for some birds, especially ground feeders, to consume some dirt, the components of commercial dirt make the difference.

Typical “dirt” in our homes or yards is often commercial potting soil. Potting soil is often full of chemical additives (nitrogen fertilizers), compost and manure. It often contains water- holding particles. These things are not designed to be eaten. When it is noted that a companion parrot is driven to consume potting soil, rather than furnish this delicacy it would be wise to examine the diet for mineral or protein deficiencies. Pica (an appetite for nonfood items) can arise from diets lacking vital nutrients.

## E

**Electrical cords.** Power-cords and extension cords seem to have an incredible appeal to birds. When plugged in they pose an obvious risk. When chewed on by a curious companion bird there is the very real risk of electrocution and thermal burns. Severe burns on the tongue are not uncommon for the lucky birds that escape electrocution. These burns can be extremely painful and slow to heal. Any bird unlucky enough to experience this problem should be taken to a veterinarian at once. Electrical cords from lights or heaters should always be completely out of reach and unplugged when not in use.

## F

**Fiber.** Fibers come in many types and colors. They can be part of a toy, your sofa, your carpet or bedspread. They can be natural fibers like cotton or synthetic like polyester. Any kind of fiber can be a problem if too much is ingested. Natural fibers pose slightly less risk because digestive processes can break them down. But these processes can't work well when the stomach is packed with material. Synthetic material can resist digestion and be slow to pass from the stomach. Tiny mats of synthetic fibers have been known to obstruct the outlet of the stomach and the intestines. The resulting gastro-intestinal obstruction is usually fatal. A healthy bird has digestive tract that moves food through quickly. Any decrease in the frequency or volume of droppings should be investigated promptly. If bits of fiber are noted in a bird's droppings, it can be an early warning sign of problems brewing.

## G

**Glue and grout.** Both of these G words contain components that can be hazardous when ingested. It is amazing to me that most of us consider it to be acceptable, routine and even cute when our companion birds start eating grout, sealant and caulking. These products contain chemicals that render them stable and waterproof. They were not developed to be ingested. Many emit noxious fumes as they cure. We have seen too many cockatiels that succumb quickly to the toxic effects of linoleum adhesives. Even though some of us enjoyed eating paste as kids, the sophisticated household adhesives and sealants now in common use can be very hazardous.

## H

**Hair products.** Hair products like gel, mousse and spray tend to contain relatively benign chemicals since they are designed to be used daily. Yet they can pose a problem when applied in the presence of a companion bird. Many of our birds are especially sensitive to irritants in the air. When aerosolized, these products can irritate airways and lungs. Many birds will enjoy preening their owner's hair. It's anyone's guess how much gel or mousse is ingested by a preening bird. Scanning the list of ingredients from several hair products reveals many unpronounceable words and questionable ingredients like alcohol, fragrances and color additives.

## I

**Indiscriminate Appetites.** Our birds are notorious for their indiscriminate appetites. Plastic, wire, paint, adhesives, carpets, floor tiles-the list seems endless. Why in the world do we accept these behaviors as benign?? My guess is that most people think that since the parrot is so intelligent it should know what is good or bad. Also, our birds are tough as nails in the face of most household exposures and we become complacent to events that happen without immediate dire consequences. Unfortunately we know now that many compounds can build to toxic levels with repeated exposures. We may also not relate non-food ingestion to vague signs of illness. We know from the information of wildlife biologists that parrots in the wild do ingest plant materials that are toxic to other species. Many can live on immature nuts that contain plant toxins called secondary compounds. These biological adaptations likely help our birds survive in the chemical jungles of our homes but that does not mean that we should accept nonfood item ingestion as normal.

## K

**Kleenex (tissue & boxes).** In all fairness to Kimberly Clark the problem is not specific to Kleenex. The ingestion of paper products seems to be risky. Birds that commonly play with paper may or may not eat it. There also seems to be a great deal of variability in what problems develop and over what period of time. We have recently seen three cases where there was serious GI tract problems, including proventricular dilation, in newspaper eating birds. In all three cases newspaper was flushed out of their proventriculus and ventriculus (stomach). It seemed to have both an obstructive and an irritative effect. In all three cases the birds were feather picking. All signs abated after flushing and removing all paper. An amazon parrot with a long history of eating newspaper from the cage floor had severe inflammatory changes (seen on endoscopy and in biopsies) in her GI tract that have resolved slowly over time after the paper was removed. Many different clinical signs, including loose droppings, increased water output, weight loss and feather picking have resolved by simply stopping paper ingestion. It is likely that in the last 5 years the composition of paper has changed dramatically with the addition of recycled components. It is possible that something in these components contributes to the problem.

## L

**Lotion.** Certainly most people would not intentionally feed skin lotion to their companion parrot. But the inadvertent exposure may be common. Pet parrots are often frequently handled. Often we note that the feathers on the back and the head can become discolored. If handled often by owners that use hand or body lotion, it is likely that the oils inadvertently applied to the bird's feather can cause the discoloration. Once on the feathers, we can assume some ingestion while the bird preens. This can cause significant problems if skin medications are added to the lotion. We have seen problems that we thought were caused by contact and possible ingestion of retinA, topical cortisone, and heavy makeup. We know that contact with "second hand smoke" tars and oils can cause problems. Any easy way to avoid this problem is to wash hands before handling the bird. Cornstarch can also be used to absorb any oily residues off the hand.

## M

**Money.** Money deserves mention here. Its not so much the money your bird might ingest, but rather the money you may have to spend to diagnose and treat illness from nonfood item ingestion. Often x-rays, blood tests and medical supportive care are essential to save the bird's life. Our birds are so good at masking signs of low-grade problems that they appear to become critically ill suddenly. Often that is an apparent precipitous decline in the face of a more chronic problem.

## N

**Necropsy.** A necropsy is the series of exams that a veterinarian must do to ascertain why a bird died. A necropsy is what everyone wants to avoid. If you do find yourself in this tragic position, it is best to allow for the necropsy to be performed. We still have so much to learn about managing birds in our homes that the information is always important. Sometimes the cause of death is not immediately apparent and histopathology or biopsies must be submitted to a pathologist for review. Although these tests can be expensive, they are the only way that we will learn. Through education and restoring common sense to parrot ownership we can hopefully prevent problems rather than treat them.

## O

**Operations.** Surgical operations are sometimes necessary to remove nonfood items from a gastro-intestinal tract. Some items act as irritants and slow normal function. Others act as obstructing foreign bodies and prevent the normal passage of food. Veterinarians are seeing more and more non-food items that can mimic the signs of severe diseases like Proventricular Dilation Disease (PDD). We have seen proventricular enlargement due to ingestion of newspaper, cardboard, rubber dog toys and corncob bedding. When diagnosed before a life threatening obstruction occurs, the obstructing material can often be removed by a surgery that enters the GI tract through the crop. Material can then be removed by flushing. Using endoscopes, veterinarians can biopsy tissue and ascertain what the offending material was and that it has been removed. Surgical procedures on the lower GI tract are much riskier and will be avoided if possible.

## P

**Prevention.** Prevention is obviously the simple answer. Like most health problems in our companion parrots, nonfood item ingestion can easily be avoided. It is an interesting phenomenon that behaviors that would be patently abnormal in our kids or our cats and dogs can be acceptable and even whimsically encouraged in our birds. If a child developed an appetite for plastic or metal it would be considered abnormal. Prevention will only occur when the risks of the behavior are spelled out. Many degenerative conditions in companion birds go unrecognized because of the natural tendency of birds to hide signs of illness. It can be difficult to directly correlate “high risk behaviors” and illness but an increased awareness of inherent risks can raise our level of suspicion.

## Q

**Quit.** Quit feeding nonfood items. If fun food is what you are after try pomegranates or beets or bok choy. Use the whole food and hang it as a toy using coarse hemp or a stainless steel skewer. For entertainment try offering clean, never sprayed natural branches from citrus, bay, eucalyptus or oak trees. Offer home grown garden flowers from some of your large producers like squash. Try using untreated fir or pine 2X4s as perches, the ultimate perch and chew toy. Cut blocks of untreated fir or pine for chewing and hang with stainless steel.

## R

**Repeat Offenders.** “Repeat offenders” and “returning to the scene of the crime”- these two phrases are commonly used to make the point that once a companion bird has found a new behavior like a new thing to chew or destroy, they are likely to do it again. These behaviors have been known to be problematic when birds have some freedom in a home. Budgies, cockatiels and umbrella cockatoos will demonstrate these behaviors. If the desired item contains noxious materials the owner may see signs of a waxing and waning illness but never relate it to the ingestion. This pattern has been observed time and time again in flighted birds. Lead, zinc and other toxins that can slowly accumulate to toxic levels can be found in urethane finishes, antique paint and curtain weights. Often these behaviors do not arouse suspicion because they seem so ordinary. When the toxin builds to critical levels, the illness can appear to be sudden.

## S

**Sandpaper, sand and silk flowers.** Some kinds of silk flowers have proven to be inordinately appealing yet deadly to some birds that ingest them. This has been observed in several cockatiels. All these birds sampled silk flowers and died within two days. All birds exhibited signs of acute toxicosis including ataxia (tippy or falling over), stupor, depression, and GI stasis. Some silk flowers could be preserved with very noxious substances and should be avoided. Sandpaper is another item to avoid. Even the sandpaper sold as perch covers may cause problems. It certainly does not help with long overgrown nails and can cause significant foot sores. Some owners have used hardware store sandpaper. This stuff can contain adhesives that can cause illness. Sand is another item commonly sold for small birds. It may be called grit and provided as a mineral supplement. But sand is silica and does not contain essential minerals. Birds that crave minerals because of dietary deficiencies may engorge on the sand and possibly impact their GI tract.

## T

**Twist ties.** Twist ties have become so common in our homes that it is hard to view them as a high-risk item. But twist ties are typically made of the cheapest wire available. That can be lead and zinc. They are usually coated with paper or plastic and seem to be a favorite item for cockatiels. They pose several types of risk. First, a short piece of sharp wire can act as a perforating foreign body. The wire could pierce the GI tract anywhere from the throat to the intestines. The resulting infection could be fatal. The wire itself can cause toxic levels of lead or zinc. The paper or plastic coating could irritate or obstruct the GI tract.

## U

**Ulcers.** Ulcers of the stomach do occur in birds. The glandular stomach or proventriculus is relatively thin-walled. This area and the transition area between the proventriculus and the ventriculus are subject to ulceration. Ulcers are areas where the lining is eroded away and perforation can result. The thick-walled stomach or ventriculus has a tough lining called a coilin. Ulceration can occur here but the thick tough lining offers better protection. Ulcers can occur due to systemic disease or infection, but are most likely to occur because of continued contact with an irritant substance. Pieces of nonfood items, particularly plastics containing

metal, have caused this kind of ulceration. The anatomy of the bird's GI tract predisposes it to these problems because the outlet to the intestines from the stomach is very tiny. Typically this ensures that particles that leave the stomach are ready for the small intestine. It also means that pieces resistant to digestion will stay in the ventriculus for a long time. This contact over time can result in irritation and ulcers even when there is no absorption of toxins.

## V

**Varnish.** Varnish and urethane finishes on furniture and decorative items can contain metals and other ingredients that can act as toxins when ingested. Budgies and cockatiels are notorious for picking at and ingesting these finishes. One budgie had a several year history of episodic lead and zinc toxicosis. After each episode it would take him weeks to recover his strength. As he became able to fly around the house again, he would eventually relapse. The offending item was finally found. It was a urethane finish on a table. The finish contained high levels of both lead and zinc.

## W

**Washers and weights.** Washers and other hardware are typically galvanized. That means that they are coated with zinc. Nuts, bolts, c-clamps, and much other hardware in a bird's cage can be galvanized. The zinc coating becomes a problem when a parrot frequently mouths or chews it. When this behavior continues over time the zinc can build to toxic levels. Toxic levels of zinc can cause feather picking, GI problems and kidney damage. Choosing to use only stainless steel hardware will prevent this problem. Weights can be a huge problem because they are often made of lead. Lead can be found in curtain weights, fishing sinkers, leaded glass, stained glass, decorative foil and in older paint. Lead is toxic in very small amounts. Lead will typically cause ataxia, weakness and stumbling and in some birds hematuria or bloody urine. Lead intoxication is a true medical emergency.

## X

**Xray.** X-rays or radiographs are commonly used to diagnose nonfood item ingestion. Many metals and minerals show up clearly on X-rays. Even when there are no metallic densities, radiographs can show distention and abnormal patterns of gas. Barium studies can outline obstructing material and define transit time. Healthy parrots have a rapid transit time. Transit time is basically the time it takes for food to be digested and passed through the GI tract. Transit times vary by the size of the bird with smaller birds having a faster transit time. Most medium sized parrots will take less than 4 hours to pass ingested food. You can approximate your birds transit time by feeding pigmented berries and checking the cage floor for the pigmented droppings.

## Y

**Yummy and cute.** Just because it is perceived as yummy by your bird, think it through. Would you want a belly full of that? Consider the amount that they are willing to consume and their body size. Consider the typical 500gram bird. Say that bird ate two baby toys. Call the average human 75 kilograms (75,000grams). How would the human feel with the weight equivalent of 150 baby toys in his belly? For fun, do the math for peanuts. Say the 500-gram bird ate five peanuts. Your equivalent serving would be five peanuts times 150 or 750 peanuts.  
**YUCK!!!!**

## Z

**Zinc.** Zinc may be the eye-opener nonfood item that started it all. Certainly the realization that many accepted practices were not in the best interest of birds may have gained some ground there. Our companion birds are tough. Just because they seem upright and feathered, that doesn't mean they are in the best of health. Many parrots are surviving not thriving. A significant number are not even surviving. Re-kindling our common sense and educating ourselves about their innate needs and behaviors is essential to their survival.